DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 010 RC 024 042

AUTHOR	Lucas, David M.; Jarrett, Charles W.
TITLE	Rapid Rural Appraisal: A Case Study in Rural Mexico.
PUB DATE	2001-02-00
NOTE	28p.; In: 2001 Monograph Series, Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the National Association of African American Studies, the National Association of Hispanic and Latino Studies, the National Association of Native American Studies, and the International Association of Asian Studies (Houston, TX, February 12-17, 2001).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Access to Education; College Students; *Community Attitudes; *Field Experience Programs; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Intercollegiate Cooperation; Interdisciplinary Approach; Poverty; Qualitative Research; *Quality of Life; Research Methodology; *Rural Areas; Social Science Research; *Student Research
IDENTIFIERS	North American Free Trade Agreement

ABSTRACT

The North American Free Trade Agreement has generated serious debate regarding the stimulating effects of foreign investment on Mexico's economy. Saltillo, a metropolitan center in the mountains of Coahuila, has been positively affected by recent economic trends. But the village of General Cepeda, located just 50 miles from Saltillo, is relatively unaffected by recent economic improvements in the region. Mexican and American undergraduate students from the Saltillo campus of the Institute of Technology of Monterrey and Ohio University, representing a wide variety of majors, cooperated in a qualitative study to assess the attitudes of rural residents regarding social, political, and economic issues. The rapid rural appraisal method was used because it features a commitment to multidisciplinary research, team training, and qualitative data, and has an international reputation for rigorous and systematic principles of data collection. During the 12-day study, every head of household in the 175-family village was interviewed, and focus groups were conducted with village women, key informants, and village youth. Structured observations supplemented data collection. Findings revealed local residents were concerned with a lack of educational opportunities for youth, extreme poverty, high unemployment, and increasing alcoholism. Residents expressed a high degree of fear and suspicion of governmental institutions at the local, state, and federal levels. (TD)

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ED 476 010

RAPID RURAL APPRAISAL:
A CASE STUDY IN RURAL MEXICO

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Rapid Rural Appraisal: A Case Study in Rural Mexico

Abstract Principles of interpersonal communication, rural sociology, and international studies were applied during an undergraduate research project in rural Mexico. Under the supervision of faculty from Ohio University and the Institute of Technology of Monterrey (ITESM), Mexican and American undergraduate students learned to apply principles of qualitative research during a field experience in northern Mexico. Students from both cultures collaborated as team members during data collection, wr and oral reports of the field experience, and analysis of findings. Undergraduates were required to apply a multiplicity of academic skills including writing, oral communication, techniques of interviewing, analytical and critical thinking, principles of interpersonal communication, and technical expertise in the field. Rapid Rural Appraisal, a qualitative methodology appropriate for multidisciplinary research, was applied to assess the attitudes of rural residents regarding social, political, and economic issues. Data were collected in the summer of 1999 from one hundred seventy-five (175) families residing in rural General Cepeda, Coahuila, Mexico. Findings revealed local residents were concerned with a lack of educational opportunities for youth, extreme conditions of poverty, high incidences of unemployment, and an increasing problem of alcoholism in the community. Residents expressed a high degree of fear and suspicion of governmental institutions at the local, state, and federal levels. Findings suggest Rapid Rural Appraisal may have utility for understanding community action programs in rural societies.

Introduction

Under the supervision of researchers from two universities, undergraduates from the United States and Mexico engaged in a

multidisciplinary research project near the field site of General Cepeda, Coahuila, Mexico. The project began as a ten (10) week course in international studies at Ohio University. As partial fulfillment of course requirements, Ohio University students communicated via compressed video and e-mail correspondence with faculty and students from the Saltillo Campus of the Institute of Technology of Monterrey (ITESM). Saltillo faculty were interested in collecting data from local residents concerning social, political, and economic issues. Ohio University faculty were interested in designing a pedagogical exercise appropriate for teaching undergraduate students principles of qualitative research in a rural, international setting. Mutual needs motivated faculty from both institutions to design and implement a twelve (12) day field experience in a rural Mexican village from June 13-24, 1999.

Dr. David M. Lucas, Assistant Professor of Interpersonal Communication at Ohio University Southern Campus, served as project director and coordinator of travel. Senora Rosa Ester Beltran, Professor of Sociology at the Saltillo Campus of the Institute of Technology of Monterrey (ITESM), served as translator and coordinator of interviews in the field. Dr. Charles W. Jarrett, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Ohio University

Southern Campus, served as consultant and research assistant during the project.

Defining the Problem

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has generated serious debate regarding the stimulating effects of foreign investment on Mexico's economy. One five-year report on the progress of NAFTA is rather negative, citing major revisions should be made to NAFTA that allow for the inclusion of enforceable labor and environmental standards (Global Trade Watch, 1999). Other sources cite the positive effects of NAFTA on Mexico's economy. Carlos Fuentes (1999) suggests NAFTA has institutionalized the growing economic relationship among the three North American economies. Cargill Incorporated (1999) reports trade between the United States and Mexico continues to increase, creating jobs and economic prosperity for the Mexican economy. Senora Rosa Beltran (1999) notes an expanding industrial presence has energized the economy with American corporations like John Deere, General Motors, Ford Motor Company, and Chrysler establishing business and manufacturing opportunities in Mexico. The Gross Domestic Product, a statistic

measuring all economic activities in Mexico, exhibited a growth rate of 5.1% in the year prior to this study (Chomsky, 1998).

Coahuila, third largest state in Mexico, appeared to be a major beneficiary of a revived economy. One national news source (Reuters, 1999) reported the state of Coahuila experienced a healthy economic prosperity during 1998. Echeverria (1999) notes Coahuila has a highly developed industrial infrastructure and quality work force. Senora Rosa Beltran (1999) and Jose Siller (1999) suggest foreign investment has been a motivating factor in the recent economic revival of northern Mexico.

Saltillo, a major metropolitan center located in the mountains of Coahuila, has been positively affected by the recent economic trends. Located about an hour from the financial center of Monterrey, Nuevo Leon, Saltillo boasts an urban population of over six hundred thousand (600,000) people. Data tended to confirm Saltillo's economic prosperity, as unemployment rates were at an all time low of 2.9% (Escheverria, 1999).

Located just fifty (50) miles from Saltillo in the same state of Coahuila, Mexico, the village of General Cepeda (pronounced Hen-er-al Say-pay-da) appeared relatively unaffected by recent economic improvements in the region. Although two main roads

lead to the village and intersect there, General Cepeda remains an isolated community of mostly disenfranchised people (Beltran, 1999). People in the village were experiencing extreme poverty with unemployment rates approaching 35% (Echeverria, 2000).

Researchers from the Saltillo Campus of (ITESM) and Ohio University were interested in learning more about the perceptions of rural people regarding social and economic changes in Coahuila. Although data existed on the attitudes of people living in urban centers like Saltillo, there was less research on the perceptions of people living in the more rural, isolated communities of Coahuila (Beltran,1999). Rapid Rural Appraisal, an effective research technique for assessing the attitudes and perceptions of rural people, was selected as an appropriate method of data collection. Rapid Rural Appraisal has a reputation for providing good descriptive assessments of the needs of rural populations.

Defining Rapid Rural Appraisal

Robert Chambers (1992), Anthony Dunn (1994), and Krishna Kumar (1990) argue Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) has become an increasingly important method of research in rural

regions where descriptive analysis may be a more practical approach due to the constraints of time and funding. This qualitative research technique ensures learning takes place in the field, relying on the knowledge expressed by local people. Kumar (1990) suggests Rapid Rural Appraisal has an international reputation for rigorous and systematic principles of data collection, often providing reliable descriptions of the needs and priorities of rural people for policy-makers interested in evaluating the utility of developmental programs in isolated regions (Kumar, 1990).

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) has no strict set of methodological procedures. Chambers (1992), Dunn (1994), and Kumar (1990) argue several distinctive features are emerging that provide researchers a set of guidelines for producing good results.

1) ***(RRA) features a commitment to "multi-disciplinary research"***

   Chambers (1992) and Dunn (1994) note a multi-disciplinary team of researchers from diverse disciplines provide a wide range of perspectives for data collection, interpretation, and analysis.

2) ***(RRA) features a commitment to "team training"***

   Chambers (1992) and Dunn (1994) note team training is a crucial step for achieving consistent approaches to data collection in the field.

3) ***(RRA) features a commitment to "qualitative data"***

Chambers (1992), Kumar (1990), and Kumar and Casley (1993) note the term "qualitative" refers to a descriptive type of data made by researchers who combine their perceptions of local culture with rapid appraisal surveys of native attitudes and cultural practices.

This study satisfies the criteria for each distinctive methodological feature of (RRA).

This study was a collaborative effort by researchers from two institutions of higher learning representing multiple disciplines including sociology, interpersonal communication, media instruction, and international studies. A multi-disciplinary team of Mexican and American undergraduates were selected for inclusion in the research project representing majors in education, engineering, business, law, human geography, interpersonal communication, criminal justice, media instruction, and sociology.

A rigorous set of procedures and guidelines were established for the selection of students. Students were required to submit a written essay stating 1) their reasons for wishing to participate, 2) their possible contributions as members of an interdisciplinary research team, and 3) their previous experience with the application of qualitative research methodologies. Students were not required to be bi-lingual. Fourteen (14)

American students and fourteen (14) Mexican students were selected for inclusion in the research.

Researchers established a "virtual classroom" for training students prior to the field experience. Electronic mail correspondence, net meeting capabilities, and communication via compressed video helped establish relationships among students from both cultures. Students were required to read articles on qualitative research, ethnographic methods, rapid rural appraisal, structured interviewing, the dynamics of focus group interviews, and principles of interpersonal communication.

Rapid Rural Appraisal requires descriptive analysis by researchers applying research methods designed for the collection of qualitative data. Rapid Rural Appraisal emerged from two intellectual traditions, each with differing perspectives on the nature and style of social research. A phenomenological paradigm questions the premise that objective reality can be determined via scientific inquiry and views social phenomena as constituting not one, but a set of multiple realities requiring subjective methods of inquiry (Kumar, 1990). A positivist paradigm suggests social phenomenon exist not only in the minds of individuals, but also as an objective social reality. The fact that a social phenomenon may

be viewed differently by subjects does not negate its existence, nor the application of scientific principles as a valid means of investigation (Casley, 1993).

Casley (1993), Chambers (1992), and Kumar (1990) indicate the methods employed in Rapid Rural Appraisal lie between the two extremes of phenomenology and logical positivism. Researchers applying Rapid Rural Appraisal in the field are encouraged to interact with one another, and local residents, using qualitative data to describe the attitudes and perspectives of rural populations. Chambers (1992) argues researchers using Rapid Rural Appraisal should also have sufficient grounding in established methods of data collection and training in the rigors of quantitative inquiry.

The Field Experience

Sunday, June 13, 1999

The United States contingency departed for Mexico on Sunday, June 13, 1999, from the airport in Cincinnati, Ohio. Arriving later that day in Monterrey, Neuva Leon, Mexico, Ohio University faculty and undergraduates were shuttled by bus to Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico. The Saltillo Campus is located some

fifty (50) miles from the field site of General Cepeda, Coahuila, Mexico. The Saltillo Campus would serve as a base of academic operations for a four-day, intensive period of student training prior to the field experience.

June 14 - 17, 1999

On Monday, June 14, 1999, faculty began training students for the field experience. Power point presentations, overhead projections, video clips of the village, maps of the village, illustrations of landmarks, residential maps illustrating the physical proximity of streets, and an historical perspective of General Cepeda were presented to acclimate students with the field site. Students observed the physical environment and "mapped out" spatial elements and reference points for further investigation.

Research teams were formed by pairing Mexican and American students. "Practice runs" were conducted so students from both cultures would become familiar with one another and the plan of research. Under the supervision of Senora Beltran, Mexican students assumed the role of guides and translators for American students. Senora Beltran assumed responsibility for organizing a format of structured interviews. Students prepared for

a schedule of interviews that would include every head-of-household in the village of General Cepeda.

Focus group interviews were planned with three target populations in the village. One focus group interview was planned with the women of the village, a second with key informants and leaders, and a third with village youth. Lectures were offered on the dynamics of focus group interviews and the necessity of creating an atmosphere of confidentiality and rapport during sessions. Research objectives were clearly defined and students studied proper techniques for transcribing notes about observations made during the facilitation of group interviews by the moderator.

Students prepared for the application of ethnographic methods in the form of structured observations in the field. This type of "artistic ethnography" requires the observer to use techniques of "empathetic learning." Observers learn to watch, listen, and learn from ritual performances that express the culture and lifestyle under study. The application of ethnographic methods meant students required some training in recording and describing observations of daily social interactions, semiotic exchanges, specific forms of communication, and ritual performances that impact the social fabric of the community under investigation.

Friday, June 18, 1999

On Friday, June 18, 1999, faculty and students moved to a hotel in General Cepeda. The hotel salon was converted into a base of operations where faculty and undergraduates could interact, an academic laboratory to assist in the completion of research objectives. Plans for the next morning included strategy sessions and the introduction of interview schedules. Using marker boards, General Cepeda was geographically divided into six (6) residential sectors, each sector being labeled with an English capital letter. Students were divided into six (6) research teams, labeled (A) through (F), and charged with the task of interviewing residents in every home of the village. Research teams were scheduled to interview one hundred seventy-five (175) residents in five (5) days, with only residents over the age of sixteen (16) considered eligible for interview.

June 19 - 23, 1999

Rapid Rural Appraisal allows for the utilization of either structured or semi-structured interviews with members of the rural population (Kumar, 1993). On Saturday, June 19, 1999, a series of structured interviews were initiated by students under the supervision of Mexican sociologist, Senora Rosa Ester Beltran.

Mexican students were assigned to initiate encounters with local residents by asking permission for an interview. With permission from respondents, interviews were recorded on either audio cassettes, or video tapes. Interviews were conducted using a standard social survey designed by Senora Beltran, and team members were responsible for writing immediate post-appraisal narratives of each interview.

Conversations began with a short statistical survey designed to obtain demographic data on residents. The statistical component of investigation was designed to last only a few minutes, providing an introduction that was non-threatening, yet meaningful. The role of information gatherers provided students a legitimate reason for engaging in the interview process.

During morning hours, Mexican and American students worked together by conducting interviews with residents of General Cepeda. Students returned to the academic laboratory at 12:00 noon for a daily lunch, followed by debriefing sessions to discuss problems encountered in the field. Sessions included a faculty assessment of the physical and emotional well-being of students, discussion of sampling procedures, and an evaluation of

the consistency of data collection. During afternoon hours, students returned to the field for further collection of data.

Rapid Rural Appraisal allows for the utilization of focus group interviews (Kumar, 1993). Students observed three focus group interviews under the supervision of Dr. Lucas, who served as a moderator. The first focus group interview was organized especially for the women of General Cepeda, often perceived as a disenfranchised part of the rural population (Saulniers, 1990). Women were given the opportunity to speak out on topics of education, health care, and issues concerning the future of children in the village. A second focus group interview involved leaders of the village discussing governmental issues, political concerns, and economic changes that impact life in the village. A third focus group interview involved village youth discussing education, job opportunities, and recreational activities.

Rapid Rural Appraisal embraces a holistic approach regarding methods of research. An essential goal is to understand another way of life from the native, local point of view. Berg (2000) describes ethnography as cultural descriptions by researchers placed in the midst of a particular group for the purpose of understanding the native perspective. The holistic

nature of Rapid Rural Appraisal encourages the use of ethnographic principles. Students were instructed to make "structured observations" of residents in public places of business, government buildings, the town square, and several local ceremonies including a wedding, a holiday festival, and a funeral. Invitations to join residents during informal social interactions provided additional opportunities for making structured observations in the field. Berg (1998) considers opportunities of this nature examples of "artistic ethnography," defined in the literature as ritual performances expressing regular, occurring performances of culture and life transmitted to researchers by means of verbal and nonverbal communication. Faculty considered these types of community interactions worthy of investigation, for they offered students symbolic meaning to the cultural identity and cultural boundaries of local residents.

At the end of each day, faculty and students would look forward to sharing their perceptions and observations during a final debriefing session. Undergraduate students synthesized information using computer technologies. Students from both cultures used lap top computers to summarize interviews and prepare written narratives about their perceptions and impressions.

Students posted written comments about field experiences, along with still-shot, video, and digital camera photos, on a previously designated web-site through the home page of Ohio University. Family members, faculty colleagues, and interested parties from both institutions of higher learning followed the daily web-site with great enthusiasm. Field work was completed Wednesday, June 23, 1999.

Thursday, June 24, 1999

On the final morning of the field experience, students were given the opportunity to express positive and/or negative comments about the project in the form of course evaluations. Comments from students of both cultures were very positive with regard to the research experience. Students agreed inclusion in the project enhanced learning skills with respect to cultural diversity, communication, interpersonal dynamics, computer applications, descriptive writing, and the application of qualitative research techniques. Students stated they learned from the curricula and from one another as peers in a multidisciplinary project. American students felt the opportunity to conduct research in an international setting particularly enhanced the value of the experience. Mexican students requested a similar study be designed for a field

experience in the United States. Negative comments concerned the relatively short period of time for research in the field. In the late morning hours of Thursday, June 24, 1999, the American contingency left Saltillo by shuttle bus bound for Monterrey, Nuevo Leon and departure from Mexico.

Conclusions

The findings suggest residents were concerned with the socio-economic problems impacting their daily existence. Residents cited lack of public and private educational institutions constituted a major problem in the village. Residents were convinced better education would provide their children with discipline, knowledge, opportunities for employment, and a brighter future. Residents were not optimistic that educational opportunities would improve in General Cepeda.

Poverty in the region was perceived by villagers as a very serious problem. Residents expressed concern over a lack of programs to reduce poverty and indicated unemployment led to other social ills including crime, alcoholism, drug abuse, and apathy. The people of the village expressed a general distrust of governmental institutions at the local, state, and federal levels.

Residents expressed the opinion their lives were marginalized, with little opportunity for changes to occur through existing community action programs.

Researchers left General Cepeda with the impression that residents wanted more effective community action programs, especially programs designed to improve living standards, educate the populace, and increase employment opportunities in the region. Residents indicated the need for governmental support to reduce social problems like crime, alcoholism, drug abuse, and apathy among unemployed villagers.

This study provided undergraduates an applied learning experience that may prove extremely helpful in the future, particularly for students engaging in international research following graduation. American students unanimously agreed the act of conducting research in a foreign culture was an enlightening experience. Mexican students and American students agreed the experience of team building and peer learning contributed greatly to their satisfaction with the project. Linkages between students have continued via electronic correspondence, which suggests students from both cultures value personal relationships formed during the field experience.

Findings suggest university students are capable of meeting the challenges of qualitative research at the undergraduate level. Students were required to apply a multiplicity of academic skills to meet the pedagogical demands of this research project.

As partial fulfillment of course goals, students were required to submit final written and oral narratives of the field experience. Students exhibited technical expertise in the field, using lap top computers to post daily research activities on a web site established by researchers. Students demonstrated a knowledge of qualitative research techniques by completing scheduled interviews with village residents, observing focus group interviews with target populations, and making structured observations of an ethnographic nature in during field research. Students applied principles of interpersonal communication during each phase of data collection and with final oral narratives presented in a group setting. This type of study requires a synthesis of learning experiences and compliments the current trend in higher education to provide a capstone experience at the senior level of undergraduate study.

Rapid Rural Appraisal proved to be an appropriate methodology for teaching undergraduates the principles of

qualitative research in a rural setting. The descriptive nature of this methodology offered undergraduates an opportunity to apply principles of rural sociology, interpersonal communication, and international studies. Consistent with studies using rapid appraisal methodologies, findings offer descriptive information that may supplement more rigorous quantitative analysis of rural social problems. Studies of this nature offer valuable insight to rural policy-makers concerned with the utility of community action programs in isolated regions. Study findings may be of value to policy-makers concerned with improving socio-economic conditions in General Cepeda.

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